

Title: My Learning Bildungsroman
By Virginia Harris

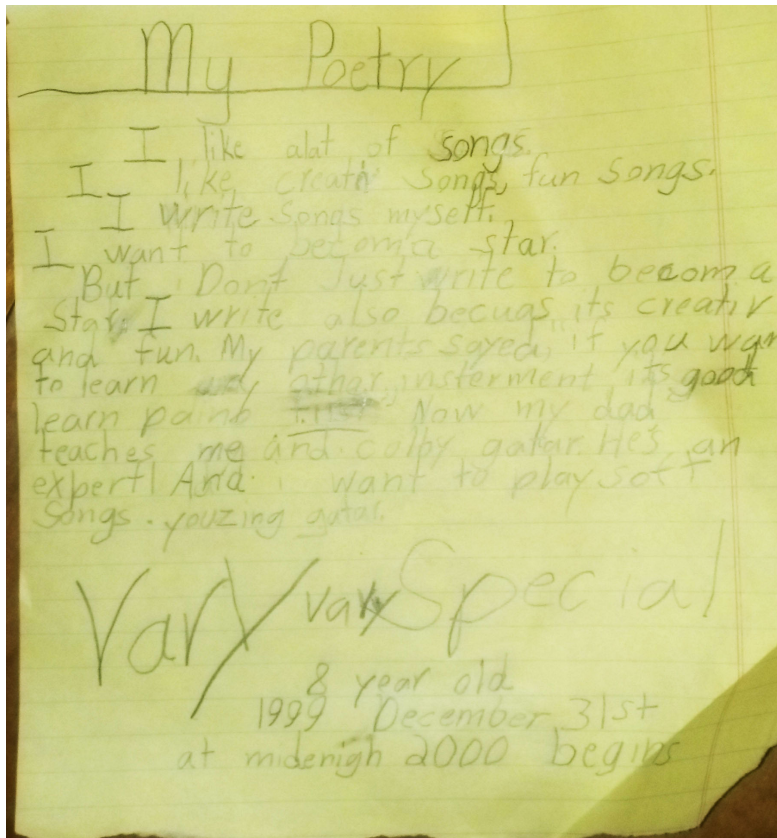
Chapter 1: Sigh and Sign

When I was seven years old, I wrote my first poem. *I want to get some shut-eye, but there is a monster crawling up my sign.* Sign, monster, eye, caterpillar, moon. We were offered an array of words, and told to write a poem containing all of them. I finished mine, secured it in my backpack, and carried it safely home. Later that night, after going through my things, my mother read it. She exclaimed, "A monster crawling up your sigh! That's really good. How did you come up with that?" Sitting at the kitchen table, floored by her appraisal, I wasn't sure for a moment whether or not I should correct her. What's the difference, really, between two letters? An 'n' and an 'h'?

My desire to be thought of as clever outweighed my honesty, and although I didn't understand what about that poem surpassed sufficiency, I accepted her compliments. In the years to come, every so often she'd say something to the effect of, "What was that line again? Tried to get some shut-eye, monster crawling up my sigh. I don't know how you came up with that!"

I have heard this version, the great one, so many times that I have occasionally doubted myself, believing that I was, indeed, a wordsmith at a young age. I do know that at some point after that first poem, I decided that writing was something I could do. I steadily resigned my efforts in math and science, fully aware that those things were not my designated areas of expertise. I've had a pull within me for as long as I can remember, drawing me towards monsters and things of the imagination, to pencils and pieces of paper.

Here's another:



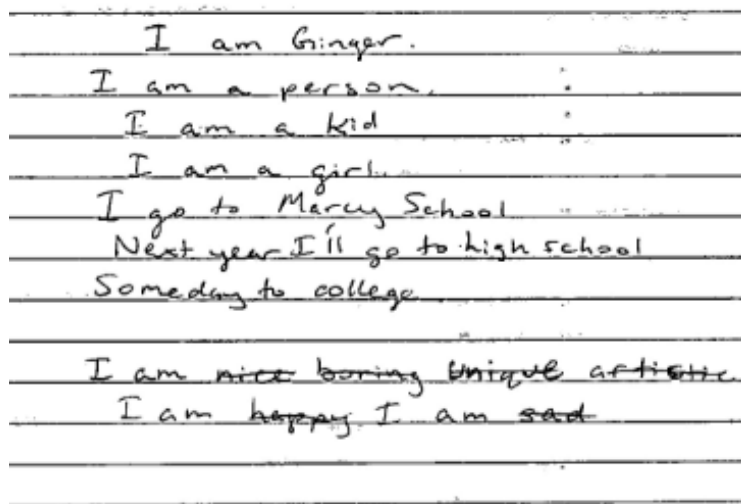
"I like a lot of songs. I like creative songs, fun songs. I write songs myself. I want to become a star. I write also because it's creative and fun."

Even now, the feeling of filling up blank pages gives me satisfaction, and the sight of numeric equations makes my enthusiasm turn off like a light switch.

Chapter 2: I Am

For about eight weeks, we had a guest teacher in my 7th grade class. He was a local spoken word poet who was willing to work for what was likely very little pay, to teach resilient, rowdy middle school students about poetry. To try to motivate us, he gave us writing prompts every class. Imagine you are walking through your neighborhood. What do you see around you? Imagine that you are an animal. What animal would you be? Write from that animal's perspective. And the most challenging: Write a poem that begins with the words "I am".

After he doled out this assignment, the other students in the room slowly began to write, while I sat stiffly in my chair. What am I?



A photograph of a piece of lined paper with handwritten text in cursive. The text is a poem that lists various identities and future aspirations. The lines are: 'I am Ginger.', 'I am a person.', 'I am a kid.', 'I am a girl.', 'I go to Marcy School', 'Next year I'll go to high school', 'Someday to college', 'I am nice boring unique artistic', and 'I am happy I am sad'.

I am Ginger.
 I am a person.
 I am a kid.
 I am a girl.
 I go to Marcy School
 Next year I'll go to high school
 Someday to college
 I am nice boring unique artistic
 I am happy I am sad

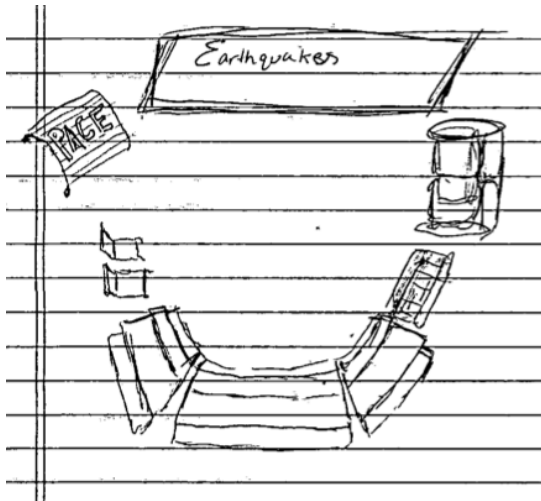
I realized that the categories I use to define myself don't say anything about who, or what, I am. There must have been things that made me myself, I knew, but I couldn't pinpoint any, too nervous about defining myself in the presence of others, in such a static and permanent way.

Instead of deciding definitively what I was, I fell, in a way, to abstractions. "I am the music. /If you pay close attention you can hear the beat. /The steady pulse that's never, really, steady". These were the first lines of the first poem I'd read to others, the first poem I'd shared with classmates. All of our poems were recorded. My high-pitched voice, my friends awkwardly beat boxing in the background (looking back, I realize that it was much more spoken word than poetry), placed on a CD with 80 or so other tracks. This was my masterpiece- an unsure and purposefully non-declarative piece of writing that fell right in with the others.

One student wrote a poem that brought admiration from the guest teacher, and stunned the rest of us. It had a strong tone of voice, a keen sense of rhythm, and was loaded with all the political satire and wit that can possibly come from a 13 year old boy. He was, without a doubt, the unofficial winner of the game we'd all been playing, and through him and his poem, the distinction had been formed between the exceptional and the unexceptional.

Chapter 3: Peace and Pace

One day, in my 7th grade social studies class, my friend and I were passing notes between us in our bench.



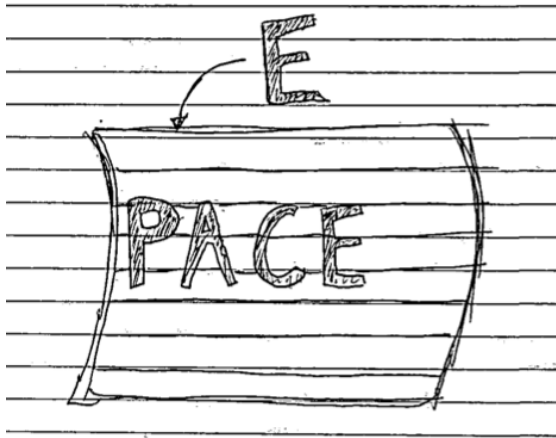
The classroom was sort of auditorium-like: no desks, just small benches, a mini bleacher, and even a couch. When our teacher (who we all called "Jay") caught us, during a discussion on earthquakes and natural disasters, he said, "Ginger. Dee. Have either of you guys ever been in an earthquake?"

We shook our heads no, trying to suppress our laughter. "Do you want to get an idea of what it's like? Here, close your eyes," And we did, so full of trust in our favorite teacher. We sat that way for about 30 seconds. The room was so silent that I began to zone out, to settle into the quiet of my own

mind. Suddenly, Jay kicked the bench we were sitting on, just hard enough to startle us. I was bolted out of my stupor. My friend and I jumped, entertained by our own reactions. The whole room filled with laughter, the students enthralled by his unconventional way of teaching, of laughing with us. He had brought the idea of an earthquake into our classroom, bringing us all back into focus. Learning was made congruent to feeling.

He was the most controversial teacher I'd ever had. Unconventional as he was, he wanted us to learn that there are times to break rules, and that we must stand up for our beliefs. He told every class the story of his PACE flag, which hung proudly on his ceiling.

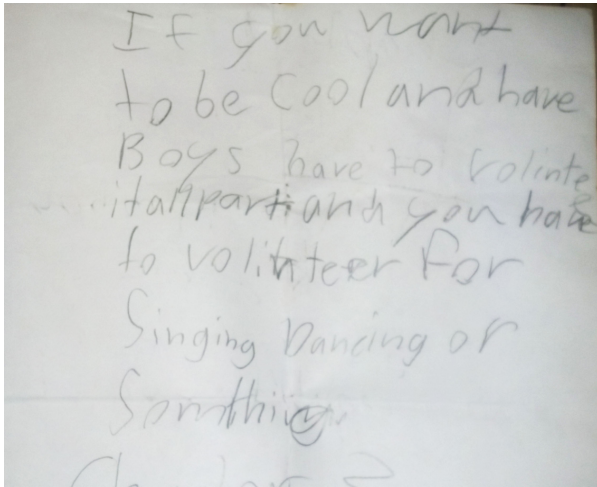
"When I first started teaching here, I placed a large peace flag on my ceiling. The administration claimed it was too controversial, too tied to politics. I fought for it, bringing up the fact that this school identifies itself as a "peace site", but I was told to take it down regardless. That's when I got the PACE flag."



The PACE on his flag was easily mistaken for PEACE, often misinterpreted to his true message. He was always finding ways to say what he wanted about social justice without being liable for misconduct. When he taught his class called "Hope and Fear", we all knew by the end that when he said 'hope', it implied: peace, open-mindedness, and to be frank, liberalism. And 'fear': violence, rejection of other cultures, and

Conservatism. Just like we all knew that the PACE flag, to which our eyes wandered in our restless moments, really meant PEACE.

During 8th grade, Jay directed our school musical of the year, *Grease*. Never having been outgoing, I was torn about whether or not to audition. I loved musical theater at the time, so perhaps that is partly what motivated me to get up on a stage, in front of all of my peers, and sing. Or maybe I was following my own advice, scrawled out during my childhood along with *Monster* and *My Poetry*:



“If you want to be cool and have boys, you have to volunteer. It’s important. And you have to volunteer for singing, dancing, or something.”

I was cast to play Patti Simcox, the loud, bubbly, and over-confident cheerleader. She was my ultimate alter ego. Upon hearing that I’d gotten a part, I was overjoyed. Come the first few practices, however, I found it challenging to exude enough confidence. Even though it was only pretend

confidence, and all my words had been written for me. I had to shout, I had to dance, and I had to make the audience laugh. Once I became comfortable, I developed a signature “Patti Simcox voice”. During one rehearsal in particular, Jay and the rest of us sat in a circle as we discussed the scene in which we sing, “You’re The One That I Want”.

“We need another dancer I think, to make it work,” Jay said.

“I could do it,” I said, after a few moments of silence. I shrugged, trying to act nonchalant.

“Yeah, that would be fine. I love having you on stage,” he said, and my made self-confidence swelled.

On opening night, I had a new kind of butterflies, so excited and terrified to show my alter ego to the world (or what felt like the world). The curtain went up, the music started, and I awaited my cue to enter stage right with a loud, resounding, “Hi, kids!”

In spite of my nerves, I made no mistakes that first night, or any of the shows following. Although I never pursued theater after this one play (it turns out that singing and dancing is not always how to be cool and gets boys), I felt like I had met a new side of myself. Some of my inexplicable fear of my own voice, of the simple act of being *declarative*, began to fade.

Chapter 4: Questions and Answers

With high school came significant changes to the way I was taught, moving from projects, papers, and an occasional math test, to a model that was much more focused on the ability to memorize information. We went to class, were informed on a certain subject for 45 minutes, and left for the next class. Not just in math, but in French, science, and social studies. The days of enlightening discussions with Jay were over, and in came a myriad of facts about U.S. History.

The most challenging subject for me, much to my father's dismay, was always science. In my freshman biology class, our teacher was particularly apathetic about teaching. He spoke with a voice that I felt was too mellow, too reserved, and almost eerily disinterested. If he'd ever been enthusiastic about the act of teaching, you wouldn't have been able to tell. Most students liked him because he was an easy grader, didn't give us assigned seats, and was not particularly a stickler for the rules.

During our first test of the year, he inexplicably left about 15 minutes in, not returning for another 10. We were all unsure if we should talk at first, unused to such lax teaching, half expecting him to return in an instant. After a minute of tentative glances at each other, chatter erupted. Places in the test that were confusing, answers to the more difficult questions, were all collectively discerned. I wondered at that moment at the carelessness in this teaching, before writing in answers to questions that I also had not been able to figure out. With educators always enforcing honesty, this sudden lack of enforcement felt like permission to cheat.

If I had appreciated the type of education that I was experiencing prior to that, I saw even less value in it from that day forward. I recognized only questions and answers, filling in blanks. We didn't even have to talk about biology.

"What did you get for number 27?"

"B."

I knew then, although it didn't register as being particularly astounding, that there were going to be so many hours in my life wasted pretending to learn things. I accepted that this type of education was nearly pointless. No end to work towards, and no means to do so.

Question: what am I learning? Answer: nothing.

When I'd come home from school some days, my mother would playfully ask, "So, what did you learn today?"

"Not a thing."

"Sounds about right," she'd say rebelliously, puttering in the kitchen.

While this one teacher can't stand to represent every high school teacher I had, I was disappointed in many other ways in high school. Often times, it didn't even have to do with the teachers themselves.

One day, during my junior year, I went out to lunch with my friend, Rachel, and her boyfriend. We got caught in traffic on the way back, and knew we were going to be late. Instead of skipping our fourth hour classes and sneaking back in during the second

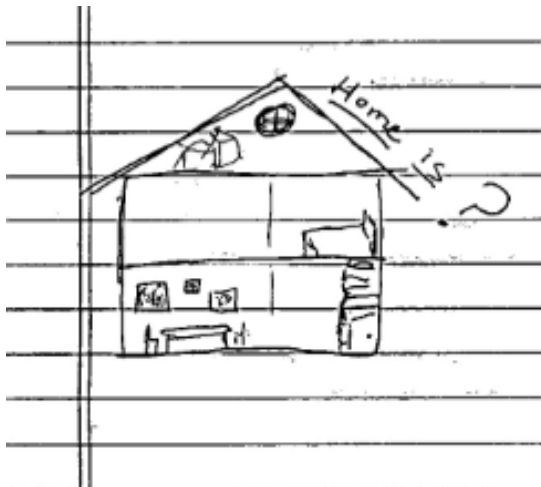
round of lunch (as the student population was too large to fit everyone in the cafeteria at once), we decided to just go to the front desk, admit we were late, and go to class. When we got there, about 5 minutes after lunch had ended, the woman at the front desk asked why we were late. We explained our situation, and she rolled her eyes at us. She grabbed the black walkie-talkie from her waist, and spoke to someone on the other end. We waited. When the second woman got there, she escorted us to detention, or what everyone inexplicably called the “star room”.

Technically, we were missing class, but we hadn’t anticipated being brought to the star room for a mistake- a first offense for all of us, and one that we were honest about. As we sat in detention (missing the class that we’d returned to attend), I found myself wondering what could be the motivation for being honest if rule breaking would have, in and of itself, saved us from punishment? I thought about the other 50 or so students skipping class at that moment, who would return when the doors opened again for second lunch, with no repercussions.

Chapter 5: Home Is Not a house

In my senior year of high school, I wrote a poem that earned me a \$2,500 scholarship prize in a poetry competition for Minneapolis high school seniors. The prompt (I have learned there is always a prompt) was to write a poem about what “home” means to you.

I almost didn’t enter due to the nature of the prompt itself. I didn’t know what home meant. Home was many, *many* things, and at times it was messy, and painful. Did that belong in a poem?



Instead of deciding definitively what home was, I wrote primarily about what it was not. “Home is not a house/Not windows or doors, /but it feels like it's yours”. It was a half-truth, a slanted way of expressing how I really felt about my own home. To write the truth would have meant writing about my mother’s statuesque position on the couch every night, about my father’s distance, my brother’s solemnness. My creaky staircase, my grandmother’s vegetable garden, the antique portraits that hung on our dining room walls. My mother’s art and my

father’s science.

Somehow, I was certain that these things weren’t right for paper. Sure that they shouldn’t belong to anything that would be read by others, with no opportunity for me to explain them. To write a poem about my real home would have allowed misinterpretation, and my ideas were so fragile already, not willing to be wrung through the minds of others.

Still, when I won I felt an immense sense of pride. In my entire high school

career, I'd never won anything. The same day that I discovered that I'd won, I was informed that I was supposed to read the poem at a ceremony that night.

My AP English and newspaper teacher pulled me aside during our 6th hour class.

"Congratulations! Aren't you excited?"

I told her I was.

"I know that this is soon, but the ceremony for the winners in all of the categories is tonight, and they'd like you to read your poem."

I thought for a moment. "In front of how many people?"

"I'm not sure."

"I don't know... I get kind of nervous in front of crowds sometimes. Do I have to?"

And then, reminding me of the guilt strategy often used by my family members, she said, "Well, they are giving you 2,500 dollars."

I agreed to read.

Reading in my own voice was much different from speaking as Patti Simcox. I felt the pressure. I got up on stage, self-conscious of my outfit, hastily thrown together, and of my poem itself. When I read, I became slightly detached from the moment. I read it through without tripping up the words, and left the stage without literally tripping. But I wasn't able to be present in that moment the way I was in *Grease*.

Still, I was grateful for the scholarship, and the praise gave me confidence. I felt, once again, like writing may be something I could succeed in.

Chapter 6: Spectrality for Dummies

When I moved away to college, everything about learning seemed different. I was freed from the certain helplessness of being young. I resisted so much that was imposed upon me during my teenage years- I was stubborn, and disliked having my school, my classes and my teachers chosen for me. I disliked being assigned homework that didn't teach me anything. I disliked having to ask permission from my parents to do anything (I was only grounded once in my life, and I snuck out).

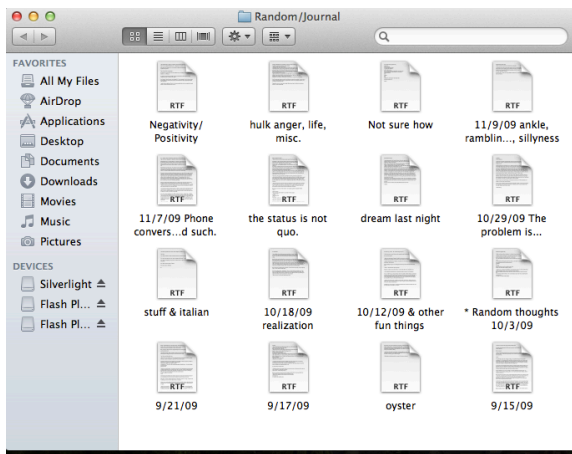
Not only that, but for the first time, I felt like I was in an environment newly conducive to learning. I had this feeling that all over campus, people were doing great things, things that I could be apart of eventually. In the beginning, I was content to thrive off of the energy of those around me. I loved being surrounded by people who were focused, and often times, even passionate. I read things that made no sense, and felt gratified when they were explained. I eavesdropped on conversations in coffee shops, and found that I didn't understand many of them.

"I'm talking about the fall of communism. I'm talking about Marx, I'm talking about the Berlin Wall. She said it was didactic! Sure, it was in Spanish. But really? Come on. Spectrality for dummies."

It thrilled me.

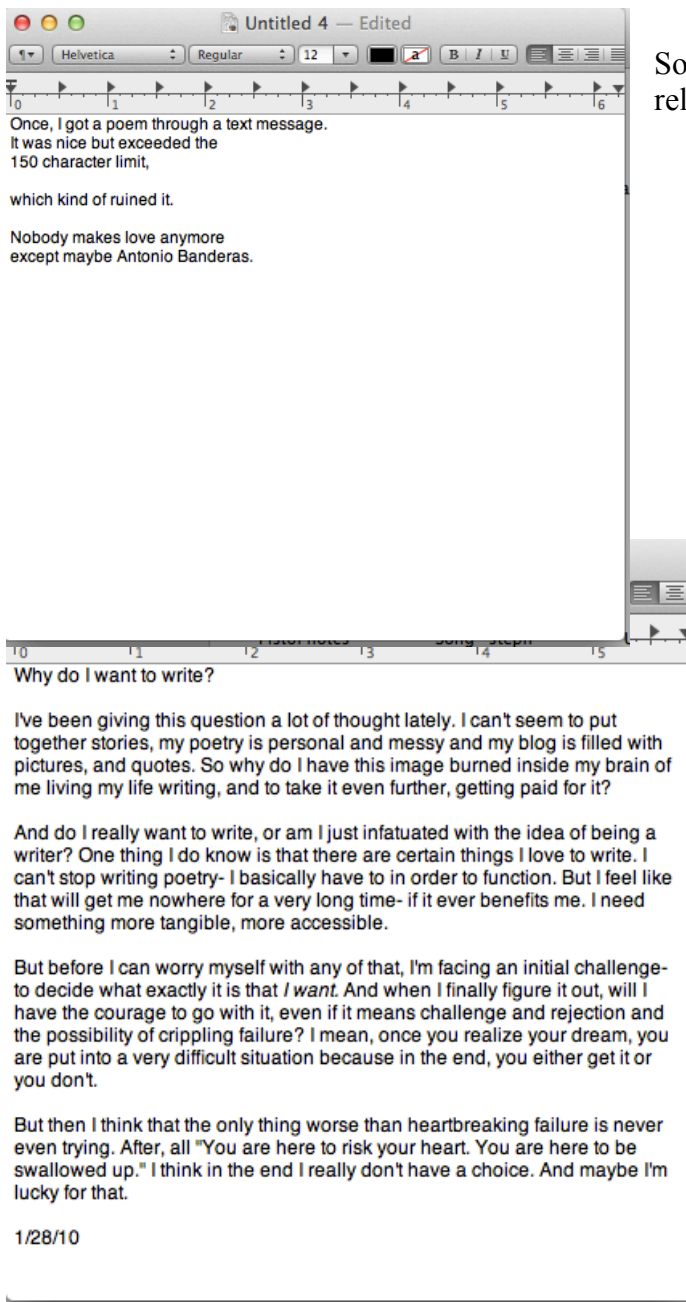
For the next two years, I discovered many things, like that I wasn't a socialist, I didn't love short fiction, and I needed to discuss things to understand them. Lecture-only classes left me under-stimulated and unmotivated. I felt, for the first time, the joy of going home after spending months away. One weekend, I went to Chicago simply

because I wanted to go. I felt that every experience brought me some small kernel of knowledge. I focused just as much on what I experienced socially and internally as I did academically. Sometimes, more.



I was armed with a clean slate, and a computer that was small enough to take anywhere, private enough to say anything. I took full advantage, writing more than I ever had, saving almost everything in word documents in folders on my computer.

If I had a problem that I was trying to work out, if I was frustrated, particularly happy or sad, I'd write about it.



Sometimes I would write about relationships.

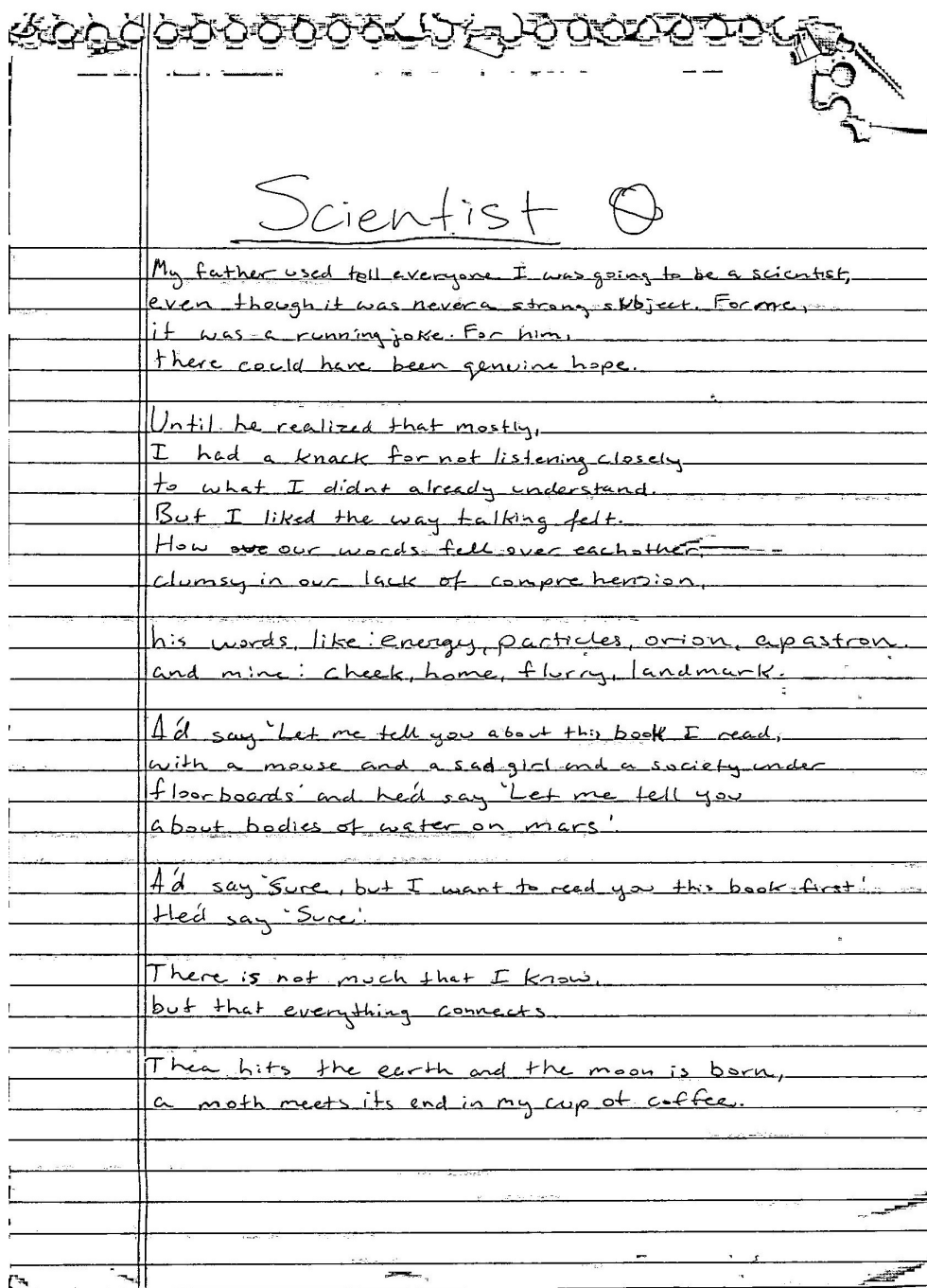
And sometimes I'd write about the future.

I became increasingly more comfortable expressing myself. I was practicing all the time, filling up an endless amount of blank space. When I wrote poetry, I was confident enough to be declarative, and formally uneducated enough to not pick apart my own style. I didn't worry

about line breaks. I placed words where they felt right.

I wrote a poem about Anne Sexton: "Ancient fur coat, / glass filled to the brim, / On the brink, / carbon monoxide filled my lungs like medicine. / Before I say anything else, / poetry was just a crutch I leaned on that broke". I wrote a poem about Hemingway, and one about Anton Chekov. I wrote about anything I could get ahold of.

I wrote about stories that acquaintances told me, hoping that it didn't qualify as some sort of intellectual property violation. With this poem, scrawled on notebook paper (which I still did from time to time), I made my peace with science:



I started to speak up in class. I had conversations with strangers. I got a job as a waitress and socialized with little discomfort. I felt good about what I was learning, and I remained largely excited and inspired for those first few years.

Chapter 7: Semicolons Are Ugly

By the second semester of my junior year, I was taking my fourth creative writing workshop. Sitting in class as we discussed Richard Hugo's *Nuts & Bolts*, an article that discusses the basics of poetry writing, I internally rolled my eyes.

If you can answer the question, to ask it is to waste time.

Maximum sentence length: seventeen words. Minimum: one.

No semicolons. Semicolons indicate relationships that only idiots need defined by punctuation. Besides, they are ugly.

Make sure each sentence is at least four words longer or shorter than the one before it.

When I'd read it at home the night before, I was particularly struck by the line, "No semicolons. Semicolons indicate relationships that only idiots need defined by punctuation. Besides, they are ugly."

I love semicolons, I thought, and became distrustful of Hugo from there on out.

That semester, during my junior year of college, I realized how many writing guidelines, creative rules even, had been imposed on me without my awareness. Although we only read this article to consider Hugo's opinions, we were also meant to see how writing could be improved when applying some basic rules. In the article, Hugo gives examples of editing his students' work:

Beware certain words that seem necessitated by grammar to make things clear but dilute the drama of the statement. These are words of temporality, causality, and opposition, and often indicate a momentary lack of faith in the imagination.

Temporality: *meanwhile, while, as* (at the same time as), *during, and* (implying "and at the same time")

**But no one comes
and the girl disappears behind folding doors
while the bus grinds and lurches away.**

And the after:

No one comes.
 The girl disappears behind folding doors.
 The bus grinds and lurches away.

Here, the words "and" and "while" point up a relation that can be provided by the mind. "While" simply means that two things happen at the same time. Without "while" they happen at the same time. What was funny about "Meanwhile, back at

I scanned Hugo's revisions. I didn't mind either version, and would have found no particular fault if I read the first one. I couldn't ignore how uncomfortable the prescriptive nature of his criticism made me feel. I didn't know if I believed that editing poetry should, as a rule, be so formulaic. Was this evidence then, proof that there are such things as "bad" and "good" art?

I looked at my own poem, *Shabbat*, in its original form and then after being edited.

Original

Shabbat

There was something in me that knew, even then,
~~this is the closest to God you'll ever get.~~ *telling not showing*
 Mumbling my way through my *how?*
 confused, muddled sense of Hebrew, through strange smiles and heat
 flooding from the kitchen.

*redneck
clunky
sandy*
*short
rest?* There is a sort of gleaming when I think back,
 everything ~~was~~ gleaming; the food spread out in delicate
 porcelain, the Chat Noir Steinlen poster, the black nose of the pleading dog, rest-
 ing of the edge of the table. *awkward
line break*

I was a child; my father told me to seek out the Holy Grail
 in the summer stars, my mother prayed with tarot cards. I learned
 to appropriate love in the quiet,
dusty places
 where I was raised.

*Tone
change
confusing* I know ~~that~~ I am an impostor, that I don't believe
 that Moses parted the Red Sea
 for me, and I am there somewhere, underneath her child's play make up,
 facing the table with the bright white table cloth and glasses,
 trying to be unseen by Him, breathing dust into the light.

I automatically edited for rules I had been taught. "Don't tell, show", "check your tenses", "be clear", and Hugo's, "Beware certain words that seem necessitated by grammar to make things clear but dilute the drama of a statement".

Revision

Shabbat

There is a sort of gleaming when I think back,
everything gleamed: the food spread out in delicate porcelain,
the Chat Noir Steinlen poster, the black nose of the pleading dog,
resting on the edge of the table.

The food sat in dishes and had names like
kiddush, *challah*, all kashrut. I mumbled the Hebrew
that I barely knew, as the bright smiles
lit a circle of light with their teeth.

I couldn't know about things like Israelite Redemption
or day of rest.

I was a child; my father told me to seek out the Holy Grail
in the summer stars, my mother prayed with tarot cards.
I learned to appropriate love in the quiet, dusty places
where I was raised.

Before dinner, my friend and I would pretend to be twins,
with matching dress-up outfits and fake diamonds,
but I knew I was an impostor, that I don't believe
that Moses parted the Red Sea
for me, and I was hiding there somewhere,

underneath her child's play make-up.
Facing the table with the bright white table cloth and glasses,
trying to be unseen by Him, breathing dust into the light.

This was the process that that I had been immersing myself in for years. I had been writing things, editing them, proclaiming my distaste for them and writing more. I looked at everything with critical eyes.

My first poetry reading had left me inspired and relaxed, but by this point I felt bored. It seemed to me that the poets were underwhelming, too similar. Successful, good-looking graduate students with chapbooks who spoke in calm, soothing voices, reading their poetry in coffee shops or bookstores. Poetry about love, their childhoods, or politics, all edited with the same rules that I used to rewrite my own poetry.

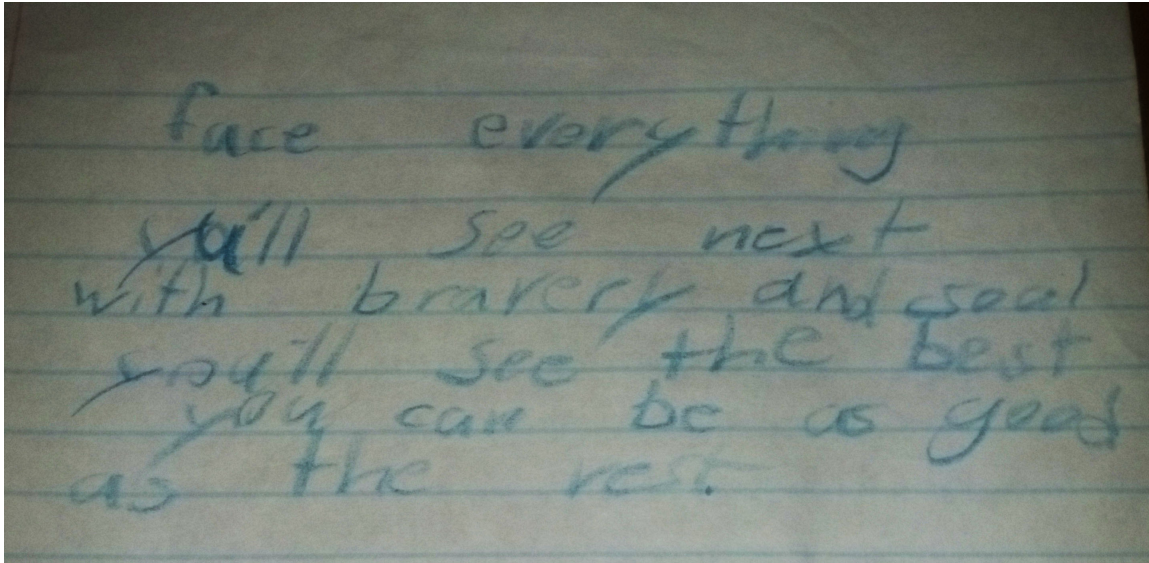
Poetry workshops had introduced me to new ideas, had increased my comfort level in sharing my work by 10 times, and had provided me with some work that I was

proud of. But I was oddly sick of it all, and I knew that it was time to take a break.

We needed some space.

Chapter 8: Bravery and Soul

When I was 8 years old, I wrote this:



“Face everything you’ll see next with bravery and soul. You’ll see the best you can be, as good as the rest.”

I realized that what I’d always been doing is weighing options, deciding on something, trying it out, leaving it behind and taking parts of it with me. Straying from the certain poetic culture I had been fascinated with for years, I felt newly freed by other mediums, other words. I read this, from *Jane Eyre*, and felt just as much as I had the first time I’d read Sylvia Plath:

★
 me—it is what no man besides will ever be.—But where am I wandering, and what am I saying; and, above all, feeling? Whether is it better, I ask, to be a slave in a fool’s paradise at Marseilles—fevered with delusive bliss one hour—suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next—or to be a village schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England?
 Yes; I feel now that I was right when I adhered to principle and law,

“But where am I wandering, what am I saying; and above all, feeling? Whether is it better, I ask, to be a slave in a fool’s paradise at Marseilles- fevered with delusive bliss one hour- suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next- or to be a village schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England?”

I had the same feeling when I watched this spoken word video:



I knew that there were still unlimited things for me to take from. I may have lost my interest in certain things, but I would continue to learn from countless others. I told myself that I had always, and would continue, emerging from every experience with all the “bravery and soul” that I spoke of as a child.

Epilogue

My education, both formal and informal, was not a smooth or easily traceable transition into adulthood. It consisted largely of working my way through half-truths, failed attempts at self-expression, being disappointed by many teachers and inspired by a few. After 14 years of schooling, there is still a heavier weight to what I don't know.

In many of the coming-of-age stories I've read throughout my college career, it is not so much that the characters have learned all they needed by the end, but that they have found a way to put to rest a sort of discomfort and restlessness. Stephen Dedalus decides to forgo all things that might impose on him in life, and seek out freedom. Jane Eyre decides to value honor and stability over passion, and is able to return to Mr. Rochester as a powerful and independent person. I've found my way into being comfortable with the unknown, with weighing options, forever dedicating myself to education that doesn't get in the way of my learning.

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